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IJoC WikiLeaks

"Oh, WikiLeaks, I would so love to RT you:" WikiLeaks, Twitter, and Information Activism

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On July 30, 2011, WikiLeaks passed 1 million Twitter followers, becoming only the 436th user of the messaging service to receive that distinction. As a radical group dedicated to information transparency, WikiLeaks was an outlier in the million-plus club, which was otherwise comprised almost entirely of celebrities broadcasting updates to fans and media outlets providing general information services. Even more remarkably, several hundred thousand of these followers had subscribed to the WikiLeaks feed *after* a U.S. court order was issued mandating that information about WikiLeaks' Twitter followers be made available for purposes of a legal investigation. As WikiLeaks weathered legal investigation by the U.S. government, an international financial blockade, and a sexual scandal involving the group's founding member and spokesperson, Twitter evolved into a primary information source for both the group's followers and media outlets reporting on WikiLeaks-related events.

This article will trace the evolution of WikiLeaks' use of Twitter, from the modest beginnings of WikiLeaks' feed in 2008 to its exponential growth in 2010 and 2011, at the height of WikiLeaks' popularity and renown. I explore how the group's use of Twitter was both exemplary, taking advantage of the particular qualities afforded by Twitter, and problematic, using Twitter in ways which were ethically questionable or which alienated former supporters of the organization. More broadly, I consider what we might learn about Twitter's potential as a tool for information activism by studying the social media strategy (or absence thereof) of an activist movement premised on developing and deploying innovative approaches to the publication of suppressed documents.

From Hacktivism to Twitter Revolution

Scholarly debate about Twitter's utility for activist groups is part of a larger conversation about the use of the Internet for political participation. In considering how the Internet might specifically help activist groups, social movement scholars have argued that the Internet's particular technological advantages, or "affordances," enable low-cost mass political organizing, lowering the bar for such actions (Leizerov, 2000). Others have noted that ICTs encourage activists to organize in loosely coupled networks rather than a top-down hierarchical structures (Aday et al., 2010), resulting in more flexible and resilient organizations, and that the online environment is particularly suited for challenging the state's ability to control citizens' access to information (Scott & Street, 2000). Exploiting these affordances, a new kind of activist has emerged in the online space, variously labeled hacker, hacktivist, or cyber activist, skilled in "reordering the technologies and infrastructure that have become part of everyday life" in order to create social change (Coleman, 2011, p. 515). By staging protests and acts of civil disobedience online, hackers are "using the networking tools and logics of contemporary global capitalism to challenge global capitalism itself" (Juris, 2008, p. 2) in unpredictable and sometimes highly dramatic fashion.

However, claims of the empowering affordances of new communications technologies—or "techno-utopian" theories of ICTs and social activism (Christensen, 2011)—have been put to the test by recent events. Scholars have observed that Internet filtering and surveillance increasingly constrain oppositional politics on the Internet, sometimes even endangering activists who have naïvely assumed that computer-mediated communications can guarantee anonymity (Deibert et al., 2010. And events ranging from revolutionary movements in the Arab world to the online protests staged by the loosely affiliated hacker collective Anonymous have thrown into sharp relief both the potential of online activism and its serious liabilities. What has become especially clear is that, in order to advance the conversation about online activism, it is now less important to speculate about what affordances the Internet might bring than it is to consider how these affordances are actually used by both activist groups and those who might seek to quell them.

Twitter has become an obvious venue for studying the relationship between social media and activism, not least because of the range of groups who have embraced it as a tool, from global anti-corporate campaigners to Chinese dissidents. But to date, there has been little work on how specific Twitter accounts have functioned over time; rather, recent work on Twitter activism has usually been event-based (e.g., Segerberg & Bennet, 2011). As well, much previous research on Twitter has been based on the assessment of anonymous tweets. Scholars have studied topics such as general patterns of sentiment and behavior on Twitter (Thewell et al., 2010), user demographics (Pew Research Center, 2010), the geographic range of Twitter relationships (Gruzd, Takhteyev, & Wellman, 2012, and hashtag conversations (Lindgren & Lundström, 2011), yet they have rarely looked closely at the practices of specific Twitter users. This study thus represents an effort to look at the history of an exceptional Twitter stream, but one that can, nonetheless, suggest how other activist groups might evolve in their relationship to Twitter.

WikiLeaks Meets Twitter

WikiLeaks began using Twitter at a moment when the service was going through a period of rapid growth and transformation. Originally envisioned as a small group messaging service by its founders, Twitter quickly became a site for sharing information, talking with friends, and reporting news. As Twitter grew, several key events demonstrated the platform's ability to outpace legacy media outlets or route around legal or logistical obstacles that traditional media might face during a crisis—an affordance that led some journalism scholars (e.g., Hermida, 2010) to argue that the service had permanently changed the practice of journalism. In May of 2008, for example, Chinese Twitter users alerted the world about a massive earthquake in China, ahead of both Chinese and international press outlets. And that November, after reporters were blocked from several locations during terrorist attacks in Mumbai, Indian Twitter users became the primary source of news about the attacks.

In cases such as these, Twitter's speed of delivery made it invaluable to users. Soon, however, other events foregrounded another quality of the medium: the ability to share information publicly yet (seemingly) anonymously via the platform, providing a space for exchanges on topics that remained taboo in countries with strict state control of the media. In April of 2009, Twitter users in Moldova used the service to voice discontent about election results, organizing a protest that led to a second election being held (Barry, 2009). Three months later, Iranian protesters used the service to organize and broadcast news of an (unsuccessful) effort to unseat Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

By the time these two protests took place, WikiLeaks had been active on Twitter for several months. By May of 2009, they had acquired some 4,500 followers. Surveying profile information of a sample group of 500 of these followers reveals that, in some ways, early WikiLeaks followers were representative of the larger Twitter community.[1] Though some reported home countries including Dubai, Greece, Tunisa, Egypt, and Sweden, most followers identified themselves as coming from Europe and the United States, roughly correlating with the overall patterns of Twitter's geographic penetration (Gruzd et al., 2012. Many were new to Twitter, which corresponded with the astonishing growth of the service during early 2009. And given WikiLeaks' focus on online activism, it was not surprising that the majority who reported professional information on their profiles noted that they worked in the technology sector, as computer security experts, coders, or IT experts.

Less predictably, followers identified a disparate set of religious and political viewpoints in their profile descriptions, including progressive, Christian conservative, alternative, libertarian, and libertarian anarcho-capitalist. This diversity seems to run counter to research which has suggested that Twitter users tend to follow those who share their political views (Goldbeck & Hansen, 2011). Granted, a number of WikiLeaks' more conservative followers seemed to observe the group more out of curiosity than commitment: After the leak of Sarah Palin's personal emails on WikiLeaks, for example, a number of self-described Palin supporters signed on to the group's Twitter feed.[2] But the range of political viewpoints in WikiLeaks' follower base also reflected the disconnect between hacker politics and conventional notions of political polarization. As Peter Ludlow observed, WikiLeaks' supporters demonstrated that the "political compass of hacktivist groups point neither true right or true left" (Ludlow, 2010).

One thing that all of WikiLeaks' early followers had in common is that WikiLeaks did not follow them back. Though Twitter was becoming increasingly reciprocal and conversational in nature (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009), WikiLeaks followed no other Twitter users except for Tweetbackup, a service that provides a backup copy of their followers' Twitter feeds. Not until the end of 2011, when the group had acquired more than a million followers themselves, did WikiLeaks choose to follow a selection of 18

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[1] Data on WikiLeaks' Twitter followers was collected by selecting a random group of 500 WikiLeaks followers in May 2009 and reading their Twitter profiles.

[2] This was confirmed by checking follower profiles against http://www.whendidyoujointwitter.com, an online service that gives the start dates of individual Twitter users.

technology theorists, activists, and media outlets.[3]

Though some technology reporters speculated about WikiLeaks' refusal to follow others on Twitter, it is unlikely that the one-sided nature of WikiLeaks' Twitter activities reflected a deliberate strategy. Rather, given the overall Twitter practices of WikiLeaks, it is likely another indicator of WikiLeaks' overall lack of interest in the emerging conventions surrounding the use of Twitter. Tweeting sometimes several times a day, sometimes a few times a week, WikiLeaks initially used their feed as a "push" medium in the same manner that media outlets, businesses, and nonprofits around the country were beginning to use Twittter in 2009, publicizing their activities by linking to directly to the site, reposting media coverage of their leaks, and sending out announcements. At the same time, tweets from WikiLeaks were notable for their frequent spelling errors, missing words, or broken links. And though tweets sometimes contained indications (such as Assange's name or initials) that they had been authored by Assange himself, other WikiLeaks staff members also had access to the Twitter account, leading to occasional redundancy and contradiction.

As well, though WikiLeaks initially experimented with placing "#WikiLeaks" at the end of their tweets, such tags quickly all but vanished from their feed. This meant that it was difficult to track or index Twitter conversations about WikiLeaks' activities among multiple followers; more importantly, the absence of hashtags made it difficult for non-followers to discover WikiLeaks through conversations keyed to such tags. The first time WikiLeaks invented a hashtag to gather together those interested in discussing a specific leak was in November of 2009, when they urged followers to use #911texts to discuss a leak of New York-area pager messages from September 11, 2001. Despite the fact that this was a highly successful hashtag, collecting over a thousand tweets over the course of several days, WikiLeaks did not propose a hashtag again until November 2010, when the group urged followers to "please use #Cablegate to discuss the pending US Embassy cable releases" (7:58 PM, 10/28/2010).

If WikiLeaks was not particularly invested in Twitter's various conventions, the group did focus closely on the size of its Twitter following. In July of 2009, hoping to increase their follower numbers, they tweeted "Please introduce your followers to us via http://twitter.com/WikiLeaks" (12:52 AM, 7/8/2009). When the group reached 10,000 followers in October of 2009, they jokingly compared the size of their feed to that of the aging U.S. rapper MC Hammer: "celebrating our first 10k followers! As long as that's [sic] only 1/150 of @mchammer, we still have a lot of work to do though" (9:29 PM, 10/11/2009). In June, after media reports of the U.S. manhunt for Assange raised fears that WikiLeaks was endangered, a WikiLeaks tweet identified as being from Assange reminded followers to "remember that WikiLeaks is not just me: we are over 800 strong" (6:28 AM, 6/17/2010). Shortly after that, in response to a follower's comment, Assange added, "@chadfu, yes, good point, over 100k strong if we include followers/subscribers" (6:33 AM, June 17, 2010). As WikiLeaks' Twitter following at that point was nearing 100,000 accounts, Assange was equating WikiLeaks' Twitter followers with the group's supporter base. The reality was that, by the end of 2011, WikiLeaks Twitter account was followed (as indeed, it always had been) not only by supporters, but also by detractors, and by those who were merely curious about what

[3] It has since unfollowed those followers and now follows only WikiLeaks Press, an affiliated feed that tracks coverage of WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks might do next.

"Keep Us Strong": Using Twitter to Solicit Money and Labor

One reason WikiLeaks hoped to build its Twitter stream quickly was that Twitter was an important platform used by the group to solicit donations. In the feed's early days, in fact, such requests came almost weekly, subsiding after WikiLeaks established a donation page on their website in April of 2009, but returning in frequency during the group's periods of transition or challenge. Initially, WikiLeaks primarily requested funding for infrastructure. The combination of WikiLeaks' somewhat limited server capacity and donated equipment meant that the site was often offline; frequently, announcements of downtime were coupled with requests for money. In July 2009, for example, they tweeted "WikiLeaks suffering from some dying hardware in time for the weekend; please contribute for WikiLeaks 1.0" (9:50 PM, 07/03/2010). Eventually, the phrase "Keep us strong" became a standard fundraising call, accompanied by a link to the site's donation page.

At other times, however, WikiLeaks made requests to fund special projects that expanded on the group's basic mission. In June of 2009, following the failed protest movement in Iran, WikiLeaks requested "urgent completion funding" for "a prototype for a safe, completely unblockable encrypted 'twitter,' ideal for Iran, China, etc." (2:29 AM, 6/27/09). The following June, a tweet asked followers whether they would be interested in investing in "a documentary production house" (10:06 AM, 6/4/2010) run by WikiLeaks, suggesting that some in the group were interested in expanding the group's activities to include documentary video.

Other than money, WikiLeaks sometimes asked its Twitter followers for assistance with a wide variety of tasks. In doing so, the group relied on an ethic of free labor in the online space that has strong roots in the Free or Open Software Movement that Assange participated in actively in the 1990s. Just as those in this movement espoused "a set of shared goals to which the action and labor of the individual is subordinated" (Kelty, 2008, p. 228), WikiLeaks suggested, through its requests for voluntary labor, that its Twitter followers were collaborating with WikiLeaks in a shared project whose aim was radical transparency and information freedom.

The specificity of the requests WikiLeaks made of its followers is striking. In January of 2010, for example, in advance of WikiLeaks' release of the *Collateral Murder* video, they tweeted they had "encrypted videos of U.S. bomb strikes on civilians; we need super computer time" (10:10 PM, 1/8/2010). In July 2009, they asked for assistance in the investigation of the deaths of Kenyans who had leaked a document to WikiLeaks; in September, they asked for a copy of the Heidi Tagliavini Georgia war report; in October, they asked that "People who can read Bulgarian at a diplomatic level [to] contact us wl-editor@ljsf.org" (3:01 PM, 10/26/2009). In September 2010, WikiLeaks used Twitter to solicit a copy of Stuxnet, the computer virus that had damaged nuclear reactors in Iran.

A second type of request was not related directly to WikiLeaks' labor of obtaining and publishing leaks, but rather, to advocacy and publicity. In June 2009, when a reporter from *The Australian* did a WikiLeaks feature, WikiLeaks tweeted the journalist's phone number and asked followers who had been helped by WikiLeaks to contact him. In April of 2010, after the *Collateral Murder* video was released, WikiLeaks asked for help creating a more positive description of Julian Assange on Wikipedia: "WL opponents seem to have created Julian's Wikipedia page. For ethical reasons we can't edit. Please fix" (5:18 PM, 4/9/2010). When WikiLeaks became the subject of a Grand Jury investigation in the spring of 2011, WikiLeaks tweeted the number of the district attorney organizing the inquiry and asked followers to call her and tell her what they thought.

The request that followers help fix Julian Assange's Wikipedia page or protest a forthcoming criminal investigation marked a shift in the way in which WikiLeaks imagined the value of their Twitter followers. In the wake of their "mega-leaks," WikiLeaks ceased asking its followers for help with specific tasks, and instead stepped up their requests for financial or moral support for a mission already in place. And as the follower count continued to grow, WikiLeaks' Twitter stream became both a way of communicating with their follower base and of broadcasting to the media outlets that suddenly had become quite interested in what WikiLeaks was doing.

"Contact Us": Courting the Media Via Twitter

From the organization's first leak onward, WikiLeaks kept a close watch on media coverage of their material. Early correspondence between Julian Assange and other WikiLeaks founding members reveals that, though the group could be occasionally scornful of the mainstream press, they also believed that media exposure would provide the greatest circulation for their leaked material (Lynch, 2010).

Prior to using Twitter to circulate information, WikiLeaks had attempted to send out email newsletters, and at times, to contact reporters directly when they believed a leak would be of interest. On Twitter, the group began announcing leaks as they emerged, hoping reporters would find this to be an easier method of learning about material. The organization's first tweet, on February 12, 2009, referred to a leaked FBI report showing that a Maine murder victim had apparently been planning to construct a "dirty bomb" in his house. WikiLeaks' tweet linked directly to a *Bangor Daily News* story that had been reposted on WikiLeaks' site. Subsequent tweets that month linked directly to WikiLeaks documents, including a directory of businesses with ties to Scientology, a classified report on East Timor from the UN, and a RAND report on media strategy for Afghanistan. Regarding the last leak, WikiLeaks tweeted "On Monday WikiLeaks will release part of 'Pentagon Papers II,' a 318 page RAND report into the Iraq/Afghan war. Contact us" (9:09 AM, 2/29/09).

As with earlier press efforts, WikiLeaks' initial efforts to contact the media through Twitter were only marginally successful. They were hindered by the fact that, initially at least, few journalists followed WikiLeaks on Twitter (Lynch, 2010). This meant that WikiLeaks' initial tweets, unless retweeted by prominent followers, did not substantially increase the group's media presence. It was also the case that many of the leaks published on WikiLeaks between 2007 and 2010 were less interesting to the media than WikiLeaks had hoped, a matter of persistent concern to the group.

"UK Media Still Has Nothing": Using Twitter to Bypass the Press

Though WikiLeaks had little success in their early years using Twitter to draw media attention to documents on their site, they were more successful in their efforts using Twitter to transmit information that was actively being suppressed in other venues. The first attempt to use Twitter to bypass a media injunction came in July 2009, when WikiLeaks posted a 266-page report about corruption in the Turks and Caicos Islands. When a suppression order issued by a local judge prevented TCI and British media from discussing the report, WikiLeaks campaigned to increase media coverage of the report on Twitter. At first unaware of the injunction, they remarked "UK media still has nothing on 266 page Turks and Caicos corruption report" (2:34 PM, 07/20/2009) and declared that the press blackout represented "a total failure of Western Media" (5:32 AM, 7/22/2009). Over the course of several days, the group tweeted 15 times about the report and (when they learned of it) the media injunction. In the end, the presiding judge declared the media blackout ineffective due to the coverage of the report on Twitter and other social platforms, allowing the press to discuss the report.

The following month, WikiLeaks was again successful in helping to overturn an injunction, this time against media coverage of a report showing improprieties at Kaupthing, Iceland's largest bank. On July 30, 2009, after placing a credit report from Kaupthing online, WikiLeaks tweeted that they had been threatened from the bank, linking to a copy of the legal document. On August 2, when the Icelandic Broadcasting Service was served with an injunction preventing them from discussing the release, they instead broadcast an image of the WikiLeaks website. Icelanders flocked to the site to get the report (many becoming WikiLeaks Twitter followers in the process), and the injunction was overturned. On Twitter, WikiLeaks declared an "Icelandic Media/WikiLeaks victory over Kaupthing injunction. Injunction dropped! Two in 2 months" (3:38 PM, 08/04/09).

Perhaps the most well-known instance of WikiLeaks using Twitter to overturn an injunction came several months later, when WikiLeaks participated in (but did not spearhead) a larger Twitter campaign related to the oil-trading company Trafigura. In October 2009, Trafigura requested an injunction against *The Guardian* and other British press to suppress a leaked report showing that the company had engaged in toxic waste dumping in West Africa (Cohen, 2009). WikiLeaks had uploaded the report to its site that September; after hearing of the injunction, however, they reposted a link to the report and launched a volley of tweets related to Trafigura. Among other remarks, they urged British media outlets to defy the injunction, tweeting that it was "time for UK journalists to grow some balls and start violating censorship injunctions" (8:05 PM, 10/14/2009). Their efforts caused *Guardian* technology journalist Charles Arthur (@charlesarthur) to tweet in response, "Oh, @WikiLeaks, how I would love to retweet you, but I would get in so much trouble if I did" (2:28 PM, 10/16/2009).

Though WikiLeaks was able to spread word to their follower base, the Twitter campaign against Trafigura reached critical mass only after British comedian Stephen Fry became involved. Alerted about the injunction by *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger, Fry encouraged his considerable follower base to author tweets in which the name "Trafigura" was given humorous or off-color connotations. "Trafigura" became a trending topic on Twitter, and within hours, Trafigura asked that their injunction be reversed. Afterward, WikiLeaks tweeted "TOTAL VICTORY in Trafigura gag case" (6:32 AM, 10/17/09). *The Guardian* acknowledged WikiLeaks' role in circulating the report in a laudatory editorial that WikiLeaks promptly retweeted.

"Slimy Journalism": Challenging Media Accounts of WikiLeaks

These three uses of Twitter—soliciting assistance, soliciting media attention, and circumventing conventional media channels—persisted as WikiLeaks' follower counts began to swell. However, beginning in April 2010, a series of events connected to WikiLeaks' U.S. leaks prompted the group to use Twitter in a new manner, this time to aggressively defend its reputation against media criticisms about the vulnerability of their operations, the care with which they handled sensitive material, and the ethics of their founder.

In April 2010, friction arose between Assange and *Mother Jones* magazine editor Dave Gilson after an unflattering profile of Assange was posted on *Mother Jones'* website (Kushner, 2010). That June, after a few acerbic exchanges—including one face-to-face encounter in which Assange accused Gilson of "right-wing reality distortion" (Gilson, 2010)—WikiLeaks linked to an article written by Gilson and called it an "example of the sort of slimy journalism we have to put up with from the 'liberal' press" (2:01 PM, 06/03/2010). They then added, "[the] broader issue of why there is a 'market' for WL beatup stories by 2nd tier US liberal press is fascinating" (9:05 AM, 06/04/2010).

A far harsher assessment of media behavior came in June 2010, when the U.S. intelligence officer Bradley Manning was arrested as the possible source of WikiLeaks' U.S. military and diplomatic materials: Adrian Lamo, known by the Twitter handle of @6, turned in Manning after a conversation in an online chat room. Having built its reputation on providing a secure environment for whistleblowers, WikiLeaks immediately went on the defensive, arguing that the cyber-libertarian magazine *Wired* had cooperated with the government and Lamo to secure the arrest. The circumstances seemed to warrant discussion: Oddly, a profile of Lamo—a convicted hacker with psychological issues—had appeared in *Wired* shortly before Manning's arrest. And Lamo had posed as a journalist in the Internet chat room where Manning had made his confession, later handing the chat room transcripts to *Wired*.

The evening after the arrest, WikiLeaks went on Twitter to compare Manning's arrest to a 2007 incident in which human rights lawyer Barbara Olshansky reported a U.S. soldier for leaking the identities of Guantanamo detainees. They asked, "Did *Wired* break journalism's sacred oath? Lamos & Poulsen call themselves journalists. Echoes of Olshansky shopping Diaz?" (5:51 PM, 06/07/10). Shortly afterward, they added, "@6/@kpoulsen: There's a special place in hell reserved for "journalists" like you and "lawyers" like Barbara Olshansky" (12:13 AM, 06/08/2010). WikiLeaks' remarks on Twitter—and *Wired's* rebuttals—led lawyer and *Salon* columnist Glen Greenwald to investigate the matter further, leading to a series of columns in which Greenwald further questioned *Wired's* involvement in Manning's arrest (Greenwald, 2010a, 2010b).

Seven months later, WikiLeaks used Twitter to attack a former ally, the British newspaper *The Guardian*. After David Leigh and Luke Harding published their book *Wikileak* in January of 2011, WikiLeaks objected strenuously to the charge that Assange was cavalier about redacting the names of Afghan informants in their "War Logs" leaks. In response, WikiLeaks tweeted that: "The *Guardian* book serialization contains malicious libels. We will be taking action" (8:27 PM, 02/22/11). Soon after, WikiLeaks referred to its former partner as "the slimiest media organization in the UK" (1:06 AM, 1/31/11). WikiLeaks continued to launch volleys at David Leigh and *The Guardian* through the spring and summer of 2011.

"Open the Archives Forever": Twitter and the End of Cablegate

WikiLeaks continued with the gradual distribution of leaked diplomatic cables throughout the first half of 2011, negotiating new partnerships in countries ranging from Nicaragua to South Africa. At the end of August 2011, however, WikiLeaks ended the gradual leak of cables by publishing the entire dataset of cables in a BitTorrent file.

WikiLeaks' decision to publish the cables was roundly condemned by WikiLeaks' initial media partners, who published a joint statement saying they "deplored" the decision and feared for the safety of individuals named in previously unredacted cables (Ball, 2011). WikiLeaks, however, lay the blame largely on David Leigh, who had published what he claimed he was told was the temporary password to the cable file in his WikiLeaks book. The group called for Leigh's resignation from the paper, tweeting that "It is strictly false that the *Guardian* was told the password or file was temporary, hence the elaborate password handover method" (1:06 AM, 9/2/11).

Whoever might ultimately be held accountable for the mass release of the WikiLeaks cables, it is significant that much of the events leading up to the mass release—and the release itself—transpired on Twitter. On August 31, WikiLeaks posted a link to a large file on Twitter, asking users to "bit Torrent download this encrypted file: file.WikiLeaks.org/file/sDgo3FDksdGwsrkrS.enc.torrent" (8:05 PM, 8/31/11). The same day, they polled their Twitter followers to determine whether they should release all the cables, asking them to reply via the hashtags "#WLVoteYes" or "#WLVoteNo."

Within hours, over a thousand WikiLeaks followers responded to the poll, with most votes suggesting that WikiLeaks should publish the cables. On September 2, Wikleaks announced that they would release all of the files, tweeting, "shining a light on 45 years of U.S. "diplomacy," it is time to open the archives forever" (4:19 AM, 9/2/11). Soon afterward, they published the decryption key for the file they had released several days before, and posted the remainder of the cables on their site. After posting, they encouraged followers to read through the cables and post observations with the hashtag #WLFIND.

The final release of the Cablegate cables demonstrated WikiLeaks' ability to harness the power of Twitter to do many things at once. First, WikiLeaks was able to manage some of the negative media attention surrounding the mass publication of the cables, by redirecting blame for the leak while casting it in a positive light as an "opening of the archives." Second, the event demonstrated WikiLeaks' ability to route around conventional media channels, as the remaining cache of cables was delivered directly to interested followers via Twitter, obviating the need for the legacy media intermediaries that had controlled the publication of cables until that point. Third, the Twitter poll showed WikiLeaks' continual reliance on its Twitter followers as "contributors" to WikiLeaks, and suggested as well that the Twitter community played an important role in decision-making at the organization. And finally, the invention of the #WLFIND hashtag as a means for followers to comment on the cable database served to centralize a conversation about the mass release of cables that focused on the substance of the cables themselves, instead of (as was the case with many media accounts) on the ethics of their release. As of February 2012, over 5,000 cable annotations had been posted with the hashtag by followers.[4]

But though Twitter played a vital role in the release of the cable database, it was also the case that, by the end of Cablegate, there were many venues aside from Twitter for those interested in discussing the wisdom of WikiLeaks' decision, as well as the disclosures that followed. WikiLeaks Central, a volunteer-run news board begun in 2010 as a supporter-run "resource for WikiLeaks related news and information," featured several columns on the new releases. On the WikiLeaks Forum (www.wikileaks-forum.com, launched in May 2011), an international community of WikiLeaks supporters analyzed cables and pointed to redaction discrepancies between the WikiLeaks-released cables and those published by WikiLeaks' original media partners. WikiLeaks' Facebook fan page, which had swelled to well over a million fans by the September 2011 release of all the cables, had updates on the cables as well. The diversity of places where supporters and the simply curious could visit to investigate and discuss not only Cablegate, but all things related to WikiLeaks, represented the transition of WikiLeaks from a relatively small activist organization with grand ambitions into a mass cultural phenomenon. It also called into question the continued importance of Twitter as a primary communications tool for the group. Since 2011, WikiLeaks has continued to gain Twitter followers—more than two million in total by early 2014. At the same time, their Twitter stream has lost a good deal of momentum, and now largely features links to articles and sites found around the web connected to the group's core mission, rather than fresh leaks or direct appeals for aid

Conclusion: The Future of WikiLeaks, The Future of Twitter Activism

The relationship between WikiLeaks' Twitter followers and their actual supporters was put to the test in December of 2010, when the U.S. government sent a request to Twitter for user information about several known WikiLeaks supporters—and, potentially, for information on WikiLeaks' entire follower base, then numbering about 637,000 subscribers. When individuals specifically named by the U.S. government (U.S. citizens Jacob Applebaum and Icelandic citizens Birgitta Jansdottir and Rop Gonggrijp) appealed to have the request overturned, the courts referred to the existing U.S. Electronic Communications Act in order to argue that the specific details requested by the government—screen names, mailing addresses, telephone numbers, credit card and bank account information, and Internet protocol addresses—were not protected acts of speech (Hedgepeth, 2011).

The U.S. government's request for Twitter user information revealed some of the limits of using Twitter as a platform for activism, making it clear that the service was never as private as activists might have believed; it is, after all, a commercial service that remains accountable to the legal systems of the states in which it operates. Though the WikiLeaks subpoena was the first public demonstration of this conflict, Twitter has continued to struggle over balancing the activist dimension of its service with its own

[4] This figure was obtained via Topsy, www.topsy.com.

commercial interests and legal obligations. In January 2012, Twitter announced that it would monitor and filter its stream in countries in which certain forms of expression might face legal sanction, a decision that earned both tempered praise and criticism from scholars of online activism. Despite this decision, in 2013, Twitter activists were denounced and arrested in Turkey and countries throughout the Middle East (Kendizor, 2014). It is clear that both Twitter itself and governments around the world are evolving in terms of understanding what Twitter may be used for and how it might be monitored or controlled. Twitter activism, if it persists, will be greatly curtailed by this changed understanding.

Even if this turns out to be the case, it is also true that WikiLeaks without Twitter would have been a different organization, one less able to make certain kinds of interventions or keep track of its supporter base during times of crisis. This brief history of WikiLeaks' use of Twitter is intended to reveal some of the complexity of the interplay between technology, human agency, and circumstance in the emergence of WikiLeaks' Twitter strategy. I have argued that WikiLeaks' use of Twitter displayed a lack of engagement with the way that Twitter was evolving as a communications network, but this non-engagement did not prevent WikiLeaks from using Twitter to build a follower base, circulate suppressed information, and forge new pathways of communication. Whatever its eccentricities, WikiLeaks—like many other people and organizations that have exploited the shifting affordances of Twitter—has facilitated new forms of interactions between WikiLeaks, the "public," the media, and the state. It remains to be seen, however, whether these new interactions will evolve into more durable pathways of communication.,and whether Twitter will remain a meeting spot for those interested in online and offline dissent.

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